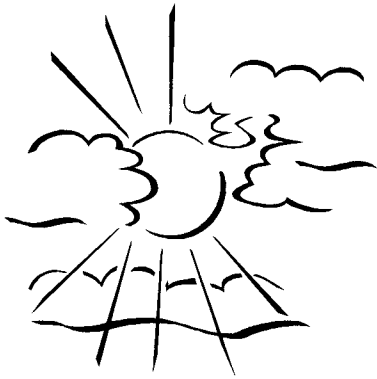


Department of Human Services

Prepared by the
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*Important story at this spot

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Michigan Report

September 6, 2005

GRANHOLM MEETS WITH KATRINA EVACUEES

Governor Jennifer Granholm traveled Tuesday to the Ft. Custer Training Center in Augusta to visit with evacuees from New Orleans who have been housed there following the devastation of their city by Hurricane Katrina.

Ms. Granholm, prior to leaving for the Army National Guard facility, told reporters in Lansing that 289 evacuees had been sent there with more expected to arrive later in the day.

Upon arriving Monday from the ravaged city after surviving a week with little to no food or water, no access to working showers or toilets, flooded homes and no way to reach friends and family, Ms. Granholm said most of the evacuees upon arrival said they mainly wanted to shower, sleep and use the phone.

Ms. Granholm said Ft. Custer can hold up to 1,000 evacuees, who would each stay there three to seven days. If necessary, Ms. Granholm said Camp Grayling in Crawford County could hold another 7,000, but many of the facilities there are unheated and unsuitable once temperatures drop with autumn's arrival.

Ms. Granholm said the state is working to arrange temporary housing for six to nine months. She held a conference call over the weekend with about 30 of the state's mayors to explore housing options.

Shelter from storm could mean new life in Michigan

September 7, 2005

BY SHAWN WINDSOR, BEN SCHMITT and NIRAJ WARIKOO
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITERS

Like so many who share the barracks, 38-year-old Claudette Brooks had never left New Orleans before. Her impression of Michigan?

"It's safe."

You hear that sentiment again and again at the Ft. Custer Training Center on the edge of Battle Creek, where more than 200 evacuees from hurricane-ravaged New Orleans were given temporary housing on Monday.

Across the nation, similar scenes both big and small are playing out. Gulf Coast evacuees, some staying closer to home in Texas or Arkansas and some fleeing much farther away to Michigan, are moving into new, safe homes -- many of them as temporary residents, some of them saying they'll stay for good.

So for now, places like Ft. Custer become home.

Another 150 evacuees are taking up residence at the Ramada Inn in Southfield; people there say they heard through Detroit-area relatives the hotel was offering free housing and made their way north.

Another two dozen people live at the Best Western Sterling Inn in Sterling Heights. They all stayed at the same building in New Orleans. Their apartment manager, a native Detroit, drove them here last week.

Here are some of the stories the people who have landed in Michigan -- looking for safety -- are telling about their lives, their experiences, their futures:

Tragedy, then escape

They met on a bridge a week ago as their city drowned.

They took refuge with 100 other people in a New Orleans high school.

Now, they're in Michigan -- and plan to stay.

Donald Henry, 28, said he's been through too much, describing how he lost his 26-year-old brother's grip and watched a flood current carry him to his death. He said his brother screamed for Henry to take care of his daughter and stepson -- but Henry saw those two 6-year-olds drown, too.

Henry said he waded through chest-deep waters to a bridge, where he met 19-year-old Sir Anthony Brooks. They've stuck together for a week.

They settled into the high school, scrounging for food and water and keeping each other safe.

"There were crazy people out there with knives and guns, and we were running out there, risking our lives, to help people who couldn't do for themselves," Henry said.

On Monday, they had had enough and caught a military helicopter to the New Orleans airport.

They boarded a plane. They didn't know where it was going.

After a stopover in Chicago, they learned their destination was Ft. Custer.

"I'm going to make Michigan my home," said Henry, a construction worker. "There ain't nothing for me in New Orleans anymore."

Brooks is sticking with him.

"It's just us two now," Brooks said. "This is my best friend, and I've only known him since the storm. This is my brother."

A baby on the way

"Ready to go to the clinic?" the Detroit volunteer asks a very pregnant Rachel Powell. Yes, she says, she is.

It's Tuesday afternoon inside a hotel room at the Ramada Inn in Southfield, and the 28-year-old hurricane evacuee from New Orleans is nearly finished with her hamburger and fries.

She's expecting a baby boy next month -- it'll be her first child born outside of New Orleans.

Powell and her boyfriend, Kirk Favorite, miss New Orleans, but both say there's nothing to go back to now. Favorite and Powell, along with 12 other family members, crammed into a van the day after the hurricane hit. Their house was torn up; a tree had smashed their roof in.

He's not sure where the family will end up, but New Orleans is out of the question for now.

As Favorite talked, his kids played with toys donated by local volunteers.

Kirshell, 12, played the board game Operation with her younger sister and said she's worried about her friends. But she's looking forward to one thing you don't typically see in New Orleans - snow.

Long journey led to safety

The day after the hurricane hit, Morris Parker Jr. walked through floodwaters to get to the Superdome. One night of unsettling anarchy later, he decided he was better off back at his third-floor apartment.

A week later, he left again -- this time for an elevated interstate, a helicopter ride and a seat on a commercial airline jet.

When he stepped onto the tarmac at Battle Creek Air National Guard base Monday, he felt safe for the first time in a week.

"It's a wonderful thing," Parker, 50, said.

And he wept.

Parker talked about his daughter, who may be somewhere in Texas; about his wife, who may be with his daughter; about the job and the city and the life he left behind. He talked about the state he'd never been to until Monday, and about this test from God.

"Not just for me," he said. "But for all of mankind."

For now, he relishes the safety, the hot showers, the cool gulp of water, the lasagna he ate Tuesday with Gov. Jennifer Granholm.

But someday soon, he will be off again, down to Texas, to his wife and daughter and work.

And from there?

"I want to go home."

Staying in Detroit

Sterling Adams lost his home and his job but he has a place to put down roots: metro Detroit.

Having made the trip north a week ago Sunday with other residents of his New Orleans apartment complex, Adams -- a Cajun chef by trade -- already was fielding calls for job leads and registering three of his kids at the Warren Consolidated School District on Tuesday.

"I'm thinking we're relocating in Detroit," said Adams, 34. "Right now, I've got no reason to go back. My home is gone and it's going to be five or six years for New Orleans to recover."

Led by their apartment manager, a native Detroiter named Earl Walker, 14 people packed into a Jeep to head north, figuring Katrina was at worst a two-day storm that would soak and shake New Orleans and then move on. Then, the group would head back south.

It didn't quite work out that way. So the group kept moving north. They arrived in Detroit late last week and by Friday they were settled into the Best Western Sterling Inn in Sterling Heights. By Tuesday, 28 evacuees were there.

Eric Smith, an 8-year-old dynamo, was still exploring his temporary home with a game room and pool. Even so, he's scaled the storm into a child-sized portion.

"It's so sad," he said. "I saw a little girl who lost her family on TV. I lost bunk beds, shoes and I had beaucoup football trophies and medals. And our puppy dog: His name is Face; he's scary-looking."

While the Louisianians were making plans for life here, Walker, 40, said he'll be heading to New Orleans as soon as he can.

"It's my home, too," he said, "and I know it will be coming back."

Free Press staff writer Joe Swickard contributed to this report.

Evacuees get housing offer McKinley says it can provide 100 long-term units in area

Wednesday, September 7, 2005

BY GEOFF LARCOM

Ann Arbor News Staff Reporter

One of Ann Arbor's biggest landlords has offered long-term access to 100 housing units for evacuees from Hurricane Katrina.

The offer from McKinley, a real estate investment and management firm with apartment complexes throughout the area, came Tuesday morning as Ann Arbor city and Washtenaw County officials met with heads of local service agencies and area housing officials to discuss what types of long-term housing are available locally for evacuees.

The meeting at Ann Arbor city hall came in response to Gov. Jennifer Granholm's Sunday conference call request to major Michigan cities to specify how many evacuees they could house if the need arose. Cities were to relay their estimates to Granholm's office today.

Heads of local service agencies were to meet again this morning at the Washtenaw County Library on Hogback Road to discuss how to coordinate help to evacuees once they get settled.

McKinley can offer access to at least 100 apartment units in the greater Washtenaw County area, said Diana Kern, executive vice president and director of properties.

Ann Arbor City Administrator Roger Fraser called McKinley's response to the state housing plea "overwhelming."

The evacuees need permanent or semi-permanent housing, thus private homes are not an option, said Cynthia Maritato, director of the state's Department of Human Services Office in Washtenaw County.

Maritato, who is collecting the list of housing options to submit to Granholm, urged people to participate in "Adopt-A-Family" efforts, in which they can fund basic needs such as medical supplies, clothing and furniture. "Imagine having nothing," Maritato said.

Maritato said a first key for evacuees is registering for help with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), to ensure they will be tracked and receive needed assistance, including federal vouchers that pay for the housing.

She said about 300 evacuees arrived at Fort Custer in Battle Creek Monday night. They'll spend from 3-7 days there before relocating, so the most immediate need is for the state to identify housing that will be open for at least 6-9 months, that offers privacy and is near public transportation, Maritato said.

Kern said the McKinley has experience in dealing with FEMA regulations and payment procedures because it owns properties in Oklahoma City, which endured extensive tornado damage a number of years ago. The firm owns properties in Ann Arbor, Ypsilanti, Ypsilanti Township, Pittsfield Township, Kalamazoo and Taylor.

The Ann Arbor YMCA also has 10 men's rooms available right now, said President and CEO Cathi Duchon, and offers from the Ann Arbor Housing Commission and aid-related Web sites added another 20 units.

Although the University of Michigan has no housing units available, said to Jim Kosteva, U-M's director of community relations, the U-M School of Information has created a new Web site - www.katrinahousing.net - to consolidate offers for housing assistance.

Tuesday's meeting of about 30 people included representatives from the state, Ann Arbor Police, Washtenaw County Red Cross, the Salvation Army, the YMCA, Ann Arbor city and schools, U-M, local housing agencies, and McKinley.

Said McKinley's Kern: "They will have nothing. I have apartments, but not food, furniture and clothing. The first thing is to get a roof over their head."

Other local efforts to offer housing to hurricane evacuees are now being directed to the statewide hotline established in Michigan.

Lisa Ferden of Mount Pleasant, who is heading the Harbor of Refuge Web site, said she is directing people with available homes to register with the Michigan Hurricane Hotline at (888) 535-6136.

The goal is to find apartments and vacant houses to place the evacuees, and using people's homes is a last resort, Ferden said. She is telling anyone who registered on Harbor of Refuge or other private sites to contact the state hotline if they are interested in opening their homes to evacuees. It's unclear whether any affected families will be sent to the homes of the Ann Arbor residents who already volunteered.

Details about contributing to the local housing list were to be posted this week on the Ann Arbor and Washtenaw County Web sites.

News Staff Reporter Amalie Nash contributed to this story. Geoff Larcom can be reached at glarcom@annarbornews.com or (734) 994-6838.

TRAVERSE CITY

Agencies set to help evacuees

*Meeting focuses
on how to assist
with relief effort*

BY BRIAN MCGILLIVARY
Record-Eagle staff writer

TRAVERSE CITY — Hurricane Katrina refugees who may arrive in Traverse City won't be turned away and won't have to wait for help, community leaders vowed.

More than 40 representatives of government, human services, private industry and the faith community attended a quickly called meeting Tuesday afternoon to answer the governor's call to help house hurricane victims.

"When we have refugees coming from within the United States, we are not going to send them away, we are not going to make them wait; we are going to take care of them," said Mary Marois, human services

director for Grand Traverse and Leelanau counties.

Gov. Jennifer Granholm has volunteered to accept up to 10,000 refugees in Michigan and the first have started to arrive at the Fort Custer Training Center in Battle Creek. Others might be sent to Camp Grayling, which can house up to 7,000 people for a short time.

Refugees will stay at the camps for three to five days

before they are moved into more permanent housing, Marois said.

She doesn't expect northern Michigan to get hundreds of people because most will want to stay in more urban areas and others won't want to endure our winter.

"This may never happen, but if it does, I want us to be prepared more than I've seen in other communities,"

she said.

Even if Camp Grayling isn't used, some hurricane victims already have arrived in Traverse City because they have friends or family here, she said.

"They still need mentors, they need food, they need housing and other assistance," she said.

The state does not want the refugees in communal arrangements such as emer-

gency shelters or moving in with families because of liability issues, Marois said.

The governor has given the communities until 6 p.m. today to report on the number of available housing units.

So far, local agencies have identified 41 possible locations, but more are needed, Marois said.

Granholm spoke Tuesday with mayors of Traverse

City, Cadillac, Grayling and Gaylord about housing refugees.

"She really stressed the importance of creating a community link with the people coming into our community," said Linda Smyka, Traverse City's mayor.

Smyka said hurricane victims will need mentors to help acclimate them to the area.

Housing will be needed for six to nine months, at which point people will be moving back or settled as permanent residents, Marois said. There will be a continuous need for food, clothing, health care, counseling, job training, transportation and other assistance.

"My feeling is we will spend the money we need to spend to protect people and worry about who pays for it later," Marois said.

Traverse City Area Public Schools already has enrolled several evacuees, school spokeswoman Chris Davis said.

City, school, agencies preparing for possibilities of evacuees

By Rick Charmoli,
Cadillac News

September 7, 2005

CADILLAC - The impact of Hurricane Katrina could be felt in the Cadillac area very soon.

The possibility of evacuees of Hurricane Katrina coming to Cadillac is not certain but the city of Cadillac, Wexford-Missaukee Department of Human Services and Cadillac Area Public Schools are getting ready regardless.

Cadillac Mayor Ron Blanchard said he was part of a conference call Sunday that involved 30 mayors from around the state with the purpose of placing up to 10,000 Louisiana residents, who were displaced by the hurricane, in Michigan. The duration of the evacuees stay would be between six and nine months, Blanchard said.

"What we understand is FEMA will pay up to 18 months of market share rent. I don't expect anyone to give facility for up to nothing," he said. "There will be wear and tear on these places after the people leave."

The city is trying to find out how many places would be available for evacuees and has a form for possible property owners or landlords to fill out if they are interested in letting someone use house/apartments, Blanchard said. The forms are available at the city offices.

If Cadillac does end up getting some evacuees, the Wexford-Missaukee Department of Human Services will be ready to help.

Department of Human Services Director Dave VanHouten said his agency will be the lead agency once the evacuees arrive in Cadillac. The agency will help get them established in a residence and help with any needs they have such as food, clothing or furnishings.

"If people need assistance, I hope we can do it for them. If they don't need assistance that is wonderful too but I strongly expect we will get some families," he said. "We are in the info gathering stage and are still up in the air how many families will come to Michigan."

CAPS also is preparing for the possibility of families coming who have school-aged children, according to Superintendent Paul Liabenow.

Liabenow said he is working with the Michigan Department of Education to help provide these families with needs.

"It is our desire to do what ever we can to help these people who are in desperate need. Will

enroll in schools as quickly as possible and could be as few as one or two day after they arrive," he said. "We are considering using Camp Torenta as a possible short-term housing fix for as many as six to 10 families. The longest they would be there would be three or four weeks. We are looking into getting clothes and food for them as well."

For more information or to get a housing form, call Linda Kent at Cadillac City Offices at 775-0181, ext. 119.

Evacuee placement

€ Citizens of Louisiana are being transported by FEMA to Fort Custer (near Battle Creek) where they will be temporarily housed for three to seven days. During this time they will receive medical assessments and stabilization and will be provided with assistance so they might make connections with extended family throughout the country.

€ Camp Grayling also may be used for these purposes in the future weeks if the numbers increase beyond Fort Custer's capacity.

€ The citizens will then be transported to communities throughout the state that are prepared to offer stable living conditions. The state is also asking community leaders to arrange for each evacuee that is in their community to be adopted by a local family, church, school or volunteer organization to guarantee a strong system of support while they stay in Michigan.

rcharmoli@cadillacnews.com | 775-NEWS (6397)

Seidman Center prepared to house evacuees

Wednesday, September 07, 2005

By Kyla King

The Grand Rapids Press

GRAND RAPIDS -- The walls have been washed, the carpet shampooed, the boxing ring disassembled and the foosball and pool tables placed in storage.

In less than two days, disaster relief coordinators have readied Grand Rapids' Seidman Youth Center to provide possibly a semi-permanent home for some of the Hurricane Katrina evacuees arriving in Michigan.

If needed, local American Red Cross officials could have up to 500 displaced people live at the center "for the duration."

However, the initial influx of evacuees will go to "Red Cross House," the former West YMCA building on Leonard Street, which has been equipped to handle 500 people.

"We're just getting it (Seidman) cleaned up," said Stephen Chase, Red Cross development director. "We try to be one step ahead of the game so if we do get more people than 500, we could accommodate them."

There may be no immediate plans to house evacuees in Seidman Center, but the now-empty building means up to 150 students will be without an after-school gathering place.

Youth Commonwealth Executive Director Ron Zoet, whose agency operates Seidman Center, said officials are working to continue football and other activities at other sites.

"The students will understand," said Grand Rapids Officer Michael Hearing, who has worked at the center for three years. "It's for the right reasons. ... A lot of lives have been devastated by the hurricane."

As he watched movers clear out of an upstairs recreation room where boxing gloves worn by Buster Mathis hung on the wall, Hearing reminded volunteer Darian Watson to clean out his locker.

Watson, a basketball coach, said he was happy to do it.

"That's just a small thing," he said. "I wish we could do more."

BY THE NUMBERS: How the state is lending a hand in hurricane relief

September 7, 2005

A look at the Michigan contribution to relief efforts in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina:

Gone or going to the Gulf Coast

Law enforcement

Wayne County: 33 deputies from the Sheriff's Office; 30 people from the county's disaster medical assistance team; two paramedics; three forensic investigators and one assistant county executive.

Oakland County: 11 deputies from the Sheriff's Office; Dr. Thomas Gordon, director of the Department of Health and Human Services, providing mental health services in Gulfport, Miss.

Michigan State Police: 30 troopers.

Suburban police and fire departments: Six Warren firefighters; six police officers each from Royal Oak and Southfield; five Sterling Heights firefighters; four Southfield firefighters; four police officers from Auburn Hills; four police and firefighters each from Redford Township and Canton; two police officers from Farmington Hills and Birmingham; two firefighters each from West Bloomfield and Rochester Hills.

Detroit: The city has sent Homeland Security Director Shelby Slater.

Medical

Four Michigan dentists: Father-and-son team Robert J. Nicola and Robert L. Nicola of Portage, Gary Berman of Belleville and Jane Kaminski of Detroit are members of the FEMA Disaster Mortuary Operation Response Team.

Henry Ford Hospital: 23 people, including a doctor, nurses, housekeeping staff and food service workers.

Community EMS in Farmington Hills: Five ambulance teams from Botsford Hospital.

Medstar Transportation Services: Four ambulances and 13 people.

State Services

Michigan Department of Transportation: A bridge repair rig and contractual fuel trucks; four C130 transport planes will move more evacuees. Michigan Department of Natural Resources: 25 boats and 100 officers.

Military

Michigan National Guard: More than 600 Guard members, including 415 Army National Guard military police officers.

Michigan Air National Guard: Eight civilian firefighters from 127th Wing will be deployed.

Michigan Air Force Reserve: Nine mortuary science specialists leaving today.

U.S. Coast Guard: Five members from Michigan units -- including an expert boat mechanic, two helicopter pilots and two rescue swimmers and one airboat.

Evacuees in Michigan

Ft. Custer Training Center near Battle Creek: 280 people, two dogs and two cats from Louisiana landed Monday. May get up to 500 more.

Best Western Sterling Inn, Sterling Heights: 28 expected to be housed through Dec. 1.

Ramada Inn, Southfield: 150 with more expected.

Comfort Inn in Mt. Clemens: 40 arrived Tuesday.

Summit Academy Schools in Flat Rock: 10 families to arrive Sept. 12 and be put up in apartments Downriver. Rent and food bills will be paid for six months by the schools.

University of Michigan: 15 displaced students will enroll in the Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning.

Wayne State University: 38 displaced students have enrolled. Officials expect 50 more.

Michigan State University: 25 displaced students from Tulane and Loyola universities to enroll at MSU's College of Law.

Free Press staff

Michigan helps the relief efforts

Detroit Free Press - September 7, 2005

FENNVILLE

Visit to doctor scrapped for a mission of mercy

Bubba Butler was supposed to have a much-needed appointment with his doctor on Friday. The Fennville husband and father of six has kidney cancer.

But Butler is from the tiny Mississippi town of Tunica, where his mother runs a small motel. In tears, she told him Aug. 31 about the evacuees staying there.

The owner of a trucking company, Butler decided he needed to help more than he needed to see his doctor.

"If God has taken me this far, he'll take me the rest of the way," Butler said.

Local radio stations announced Butler's mercy mission and by 11:35 p.m. Friday, the residents of Fennville, in Allegan County, had filled the truck with donated items. He arrived in Tunica, about 35 miles south of Memphis, at 10 a.m. Saturday.

"When we arrived, the tears, the love, the joy that these people had, just to know they had not been forgotten," Butler said. "It was just a great feeling."

Perhaps his most poignant memory involved a burn victim. "His name was Ernie; he was just laying there in pain," Butler said. "So I gave him my pain medication."

Butler says he plans to send another of his trucks loaded with supplies this weekend.

"Michigan is what I call home, but I was born and raised down there. That's my state, and they need everybody," Butler said.

To help his effort, call 269-561-8124, 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily.

By Peggy Walsh-Sarnecki

DETROIT

8 church members set out to aid families

The Rev. Keith Crawford of the Grace Community Church in Detroit headed to the Gulf Coast on Tuesday with seven congregants, a 37-foot motor home, a 15-passenger van and a trailer loaded with bottled water and granola bars.

The group's goal is to find at least two or three families that would like to relocate to Detroit.

By Marisol Bello

MACOMB COUNTY

8 semitrailers of goods ready to hit the road

Sometimes a great notion can turn into mountains of diapers, bottled water, clothes, toiletries and medical supplies. And it did at 13 1/2 Mile and Little Mack.

Nick Zander, a jeans and shoe manufacturer from Brighton, and some buddies were thinking they could collect some goods for storm relief and by Tuesday they had enough to fill about eight semitrailers, including donations from the Detroit Lions.

"We want to get on the road Thursday morning, and we're still looking for more rigs and drivers," Zander said.

For information, call Zander at 810-691-4308.

By Joe Swickard

Letters to the Editor

Detroit News
September 7, 2005

Show families compassion

It is an outrage and national disgrace that officials at all levels are failing to value life for poor American citizens. Four full days after the natural disaster along the Gulf Coast, provisions are just beginning to reach poor children and families in New Orleans, days after the media have reached them and documented their plight. Worse yet, those who are suffering have been painted with a broad brush as looters and shooters.

Our most recent three presidents have called for the American people to be compassionate. The American people yearn to see compassion from officials in charge.

Sharon Claytor Peters
President and Chief Executive
Michigan's Children
Lansing

GOP turns deaf ear to poor

New Orleans is our own Warsaw ghetto -- only this time it is the poor and largely African-American people who are being annihilated. They were being left in a drowning city with no food or water or a place to sleep. Countries from around the world have offered aid and Washington initially turned a deaf ear to these offers. The Republicans who control Washington should be ashamed of themselves.

Leslie Malcolmson
Detroit

Homeless shelters bursting at seams

Need rises along with jobless rate

*By HILLARY WHITCOMB JESSE
Port Huron Times Herald
September 7, 2005*

It's not the time of year you picture people in need, blowing on cold, red fingers and huddling into old jackets to stay warm.

The nights aren't yet frigid, and there is no TV footage of chilly people sleeping over subway vents for warmth.

But homelessness is up in St. Clair County, and it doesn't have to do with Hurricane Katrina.

The county's five homeless shelters are full. They've been full for weeks - some for months - and have turned away dozens of people.

Shelter directors said there are several causes, some related to joblessness and others for economic reasons such as divorce or inability to pay rent.

With cold weather still on the way, nobody's sure how to answer the question around the corner: What happens next?

Full and overflowing

Mother Hill's House of Hope shelter opened in June in the old Tyler School building in Port Huron. It has 60 beds.

"I've been full ever since I've been open," shelter director Delores Thomason said.

She has a waiting list and tells people to keep calling back to check for openings. But "before I can call the person on my list, somebody's already at the door."

Thomason said her shelter's top priority is getting funding, "to keep the gas, the heat, the water, the lights (on)."

Donations have helped with personal items and food for clients, but monthly utility bills have Thomason going on faith.

"The Lord has always provided," she said.

Jenny Schultz, executive director of Safe Horizons, said the organization's 25-bed Pathway homeless shelter in Port Huron and 20-bed (plus cribs) Carolyn's Place shelter for domestic-violence victims both are full.

"We're turning away quite a few people," Schultz said.

Safe Horizons turned away 118 people in the past six months, she said, including 61 people in August, 21 of them in the month's last week.

She said Safe Horizons thought it would keep Heritage Hall, its other shelter, closed now that Mother Hill's is open, but "weeks like this last one make us rethink that."

Millie Yanosh, women and children's program director at Sacred Heart, which operates Clearview shelter in Port Huron for people with substance-abuse problems, said that shelter has been full, too.

"We've actually added to our beds," Yanosh said. "We never really even have any vacancies because there's always somebody to fill it."

"It's not even cold yet. This is summer. It has to be the economy," she said.

Financial woes

Schultz said a lot of the homelessness Safe Horizons has seen lately is because of evictions for breaking leases. That often means too many people have crowded into one-bedroom apartments because minimum-wage jobs don't cover the rental costs.

"The only way people can pay is if a lot of them go in together, then they're dishonest with the landlord," Schultz said.

"Unemployment continues to be a problem," she said.

Port Huron's jobless rate in June was 11.6%, while St. Clair County was at 10.2%. Both exceeded the state average of 7.3%.

Still, not everyone who's homeless is jobless.

Brandy Biggers, 25, has worked at Subway for nearly three years to support herself and her boys, ages 8, 7, 5 and 4. She and her husband split up a while ago. A trip to visit her sick sister in California a few years ago, where her family lives, resulted in too many bills and an eviction from income-based housing.

After spending time in a one-bedroom motel apartment, she couldn't handle the grimy conditions.

"We've actually been here almost two months," Biggers said, sitting on a couch in one of the lounges at Mother Hill's. That's approaching Thomason's first-time stay limit of 60 days.

Biggers wants to find a rental house for herself and her boys, but one that fits her budget and has a landlord who will rent to her seems elusive.

"I want to get a house so my kids can get their own yard, have a place to play," she said. "I need a real house I can put my kids in, and they can be safe."

Caroline Schef, 47, also is staying at Mother Hill's.

Amid a pending divorce, she was injured in a truck crash and has been physically unable to work.

"It's really hard for me since I have a job, but I haven't been able to work since (Aug.) 12th," Schef said.

She's a marketing company "sample lady" at Meijer in Marysville. She was due for tests Tuesday to see whether she could head back to work and, hopefully, find a landlord who will rent her a home.

A look into the future

Schef said the root of some people's struggle is low-paying jobs don't allow them affordable housing.

"There's got to be something where the government's got to wake up and see what's going on with (the situation) here," she said.

In the meantime, school-aged children in shelters can be tutored by teachers sent by the St. Clair County Regional Educational Service Agency. Teacher coordinator Laura McDowell said their load has increased.

The average for 2004 was to have 15 school-age children in shelter daily. Last week, there were 37.

"We haven't had this many before, so this will be learning experience. So far we're going to stay with the two rotating tutors in St. Clair County in the afternoons," McDowell said.

Contact Hillary Whitcomb Jesse at (810) 989-6277 or hjesse@gannett.com.

Originally published September 7, 2005

MIRS

Tuesday, September 6, 2005

Udow Corrects 'Inaccuracy'

The Department of Human Services (DHS) director said the news media reported inaccurate information concerning the extent foster care children were being placed in the homes of sexual predators and people with criminal records.

Talking to *MIRS* before she entered the House Family & Children Services Committee hearing on an audit critical of how DHS places children in the system (See *MIRS*, [Aug. 17, 2005](#)), Director Marianne **Udow** focused on a state auditor's report that suggested 300 of those children were in homes with adults who had sexual/criminal records.

“Two-thirds of those were parents of those children,” Udow said.

She added that her department is moving aggressively to institute a monthly background check on the criminal records of foster parents, but she hinted that state lawmakers might have to allocate more money to get the job done.

“We support the reforms outlined in the auditor's report,” the director said.

*(Contributed by Senior Capital Correspondent Tim **SKUBICK**.)*

Michigan's foster care chief pledges reform

Agency vows monthly scans for criminal records of caregivers following audit.

By Gary Heinlein / The Detroit News

Wednesday, September 7, 2005

LANSING -- Answering a scathing state audit, Human Services Director Marianne Udow pledged Tuesday her department will check the backgrounds of foster care providers more thoroughly.

The department has worked for at least six months with state police and technology experts to set up a system that will scan monthly for criminal convictions involving those who care for foster children, Udow said. It should be fully operational in 60 days, she added.

A key audit finding was that 321 foster care providers had been convicted as recently as 2003 of crimes that include sexual and domestic abuse. Their audit cited other significant deficiencies, including failure of human services caseworkers to make monthly inspections of all Michigan foster homes.

Udow, director since January 2004, said the findings overstate acknowledged problems.

Of the foster care providers the audit cites, she said, two-thirds really are biological or adoptive parents reunited with their kids by court order after completing "required changes necessary to assure that their children can safely be returned to their care."

She said ten of the cited foster care providers never had any children placed with them. "We're not staffed today to provide all the services we should be providing," Udow said.

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Michigan Report

September 6, 2005

COMMITTEES PROBE FOSTER CARE AUDIT

Both House and Senate members are looking for answers to a recent audit that questioned the effectiveness of the state's foster care system. And even the Department of Human Services, which oversees the program, is asking for legislation to force some changes to the system.

Both the House Family and Children Services and the Senate Families and Human Services committees are planning future meetings on the audit that found the foster system lacking (See Gongwer Michigan Report, August 17, 2005). But neither committee has set any agenda for legislative action to correct the failings, particularly in documenting criminal background checks.

Auditors told both committees that because the report included material findings, they would be conducting a follow-up study after the department said it had complied with the findings. But Sen. Bill Hardiman (R-Kentwood), chair of the Senate committee, was not willing to wait at least six months for that report. He called on both auditors and DHS Director Marianne Udow to report back to the committee in three months on what efforts had been made to correct the problem.

Rep. John Stahl (R-North Branch) is planning a second hearing for the department's response to the audit. After about an hour and a half of questioning auditors, Mr. Stahl decided to hold off the department's opportunity to respond for a future meeting.

Ms. Udow told the Senate committee that not only was the department in process of correcting many of the issues found in the audit, but was also expected to agree with more of the findings and recommendations in a coming final response than it had in the draft response included with the audit.

"We don't think the audit represents our current approach to foster care," she told reporters after the House committee.

The largest area of concern in the audit, at least for legislators, was lack of documentation for criminal record checks for foster families. The auditors had found instances where the background checks had not been documented and the department had said, in some of the cases, it was not required to perform the checks because the "placement" was actually back with the parents.

But the department also asserted that background checks in some of the cases may have been conducted but not recorded because staff did not have time.

“We are not staffed today to provide all the services we should be providing,” Ms. Udow said. And she said the excessive caseloads, 25-1 or more instead of the recommended 15-1, mean workers are not making the monthly visits to all foster children they are supposed to be making.

To reach that level of service would mean another 160 caseworkers and potentially \$11 million in the DHS budget.

And she didn’t contain her request for resources to her own department. She also asked for legislative help to urge the attorney general to assist the department more in appealing placement orders. “We’ve had that support in Wayne County, but we have not had that support in the other counties,” she said, noting that many of the placements about which auditors were concerned were done against the recommendations of caseworkers.

Mr. Hardiman said the department, as with the rest of the state, had to work within the current budget. “I certainly agree that we’ve been going through some difficult times,” he said. “I think we have to take what we’ve got and protect these children.”

Mr. Stahl rejected the department’s assertions that caseworkers were over-taxed and so were not completing reports on their activities. “Lack of funding and lack of staff should not be in my mind a reason for inaccuracy in recordkeeping,” he said.

But Ms. Udow said the point was largely moot with the new systems the department has for automatically tracking many of the activities attached to foster care cases. And part of that system is automatic monthly background checks on all foster care workers and any other known adults living in a foster home.

The new system is expected to be in place by the end of the year, she said.

But she is still calling for legislation that would expand the requirement for criminal background checks for foster parents. “It would put in place what we’re already doing,” she said of the changes she is requesting.

She had asked for the language to be put into legislation dealing with childcare workers, but Mr. Hardiman and Rep. Rick Baxter (R-Hanover) both said they would introduce bills in the coming weeks that would require more in-depth and more frequent checks.

“We’re looking at better documentation,” Mr. Baxter said. But he said he was working with the department to be sure the requirements were reasonable.

Ms. Udow also argued the focus on the audit is in the wrong direction. “We feel there needs to be a total change in the child welfare system,” she said. The department’s Family to Family program, which now operates in 20 counties, is more focused than previous efforts on providing families with resources to stay together rather than on finding homes for children removed from their families, she said.

In both committees, it was not only the department having to answer tough questions. Auditors also had to explain why the last audit of the foster care system was in 1994.

“The length between the audits creates a historic gap for many of us,” said Rep. Tom Pearce (R-Rockford).

Deputy Auditor General Scott Strong admitted the audit was well beyond the normal audit cycle of five years, but he said that cycle has been lengthened on many programs because the office does not have the resources to complete audits more quickly.

“We’re responsible for auditing 600 state agencies,” Mr. Strong said. “We just do not have the resources to audit those the way you would like us to.”

But Mr. Strong said this audit also took longer to complete than many because of the amount of time working with the department. “We went through an extensive amount of due process to get this report issued to be sure we and the department agreed on the facts,” he said.

And auditors were looking at the program in 2002 on a follow-up audit to the 1994 report, though that work looked only at the material findings of the preceding audit.

Panel Delves Into Audit, But Who Enforces What?

Today, the House Family & Children Services Committee learned that the highly critical findings reported by the Auditor General last month in how the state places foster care children isn't anything new. Apparently, the state's auditor found the same problems with kids being placed in the homes of family members with criminal backgrounds.

Budget cuts have forced performance audits to become more spaced out. Because of that, the Department of Human Services' (DHS) foster care system hasn't been reviewed since 1994.

"In my opinion, gentlemen, you're a little late," Rep. Dudley **SPADE** (D-Tipton) said to the three Auditor General representatives — assistant Auditor General Scott **STRONG**, Mark **FREEMAN**, the Division Auditor, and Bryan **WEILER**, who supervised the latest DHS audit.

The gist of the audit report was that DHS consistently failed to run background checks or monitor with follow-ups on institutional staff or relatives to whom foster children are entrusted. (See *MIRS Aug. 17*.) In response, DHS officials claimed that just because backgrounds weren't documented, that didn't mean the checks hadn't been made.

However, the audit revealed that 353 of the 12,900 in foster care over the last five years were living with someone that seemingly should have been screened out by the process — persons with relatively recent convictions for criminal sexual conduct, domestic violence, drug running and/or aggravated assault.

During today's hearing, it was questioned what, if anything, the Legislature could do to ensure that audit recommendations of more background checks are adhered to. The Auditor General has no enforcement powers.

Rep. Jack **HOOGENDYK** (R-Kalamazoo) tested the waters as to whether legislative response would be appropriate. He cited a portion of DHS's response to the audit that indicated there was no statute that required certain background checks.

"Obviously, there are problems that are a matter of administration," Hoogendyk said. "But as to this comment (that background checks aren't required by statute) - and I'm not one to want to do excessive legislation, but would we assume that an appropriate response might be to provide legislation requiring the check?"

Strong responded that he couldn't answer that one way or another, however, DHS has responded positively to the concept of conducting and documenting background checks.

Hoogendyk said little in response, probably in deference to the fact that Rep. Rick **BAXTER** (R-Hanover) was going to announce legislation that would incorporate some of the auditors' suggestions on the foster care program into statute.

Rep. Fulton **SHEEN** (R-Plainwell) wondered if the audit in any way reflected or monitored the state's policy that a relative's home would be preferable for child placement, as opposed to an alternative home. In conjunction with this, he pointed out that the percentages mentioned by auditors indicated that the opposite might be occurring.

"Did this study address the fact that the department is supposed to be putting these children in relatives' homes first, before sending them to foster homes?" Sheen asked.

"That really was not part of the study," Strong replied.

Spade then pointed out that, despite all of the attention the audit has received, there was only one material finding.

"And this after 11 years, two governors and four department heads," Spade said.

The representatives of the Auditor General then looked over their notes. Then they responded that there were two material findings, a new one and one left over from 1994.

Spade then asked the auditors if comparisons were made to how other states were doing in the various areas the audit found fault.

Strong responded that some comparisons are made, but for the most part that isn't a factor. However, he said, the audit report included an response from the department which stated that other states were not in compliance with some of the same federal standards cited by the auditors.

"We look at this report and, yes, we're appalled," Spade said. "But, if we find out we're actually doing better in some areas than other states, in my view we may be somewhat less concerned."

"I'd hate to see us use a bell-curve and use other states to grade our foster care system," Committee Chair John **STAHL** (R-North Branch) commented. "I believe the department should [try] to achieve as much accuracy as possible."

As the hearing drew to a close, Stahl said the committee "must muster together" to do something about the problems that were cited in the audit report. After some delay over whether a DHS representative should testify (apparently read a prepared statement), it was determined that the department would be invited to testify on the audit next week.

Following today's hearing, Baxter announced his proposed measure, stating that it would emphasize better documentation and use of technology.

"It's time for the legislature to act and pass laws to protect foster-care children," Baxter said. "Government's highest calling is to protect those who cannot protect themselves. The government has the moral responsibility that when a child is removed from an unsafe situation, he or she is not placed in a similar, potentially dangerous, environment."

State to begin periodic background checks on foster parents

9/7/2005, 1:28 a.m. ET

By AMY F. BAILEY *The Associated Press*

LANSING, Mich. (AP) — Caseworkers will do monthly criminal checks on foster care providers and other adults taking care of children being overseen by the state after a state audit released last month showed 321 foster care providers had criminal convictions.

The checks will begin by year's end, state Department of Human Services Director Marianne Udow said Tuesday after a hearing on the audit before the House Family and Children Services Committee.

While acknowledging the audit cited legitimate problems, Udow challenged some of the report's findings.

She said two-thirds of the 321 foster parents with a criminal background in the audit were the biological or adoptive parents of the children in their care. Children in those 201 homes had been removed by the state and eventually returned to their families, she said.

"These were parents who were in the system because we were concerned about the safety of their children," Udow said. In some cases, the courts ordered those children returned to their families over the objections of the department, she added.

"We do believe we checked these families, but we didn't always have the documentation and that's a problem," she said. "Even though the data in the audit were incomplete and misleading, that doesn't mean there isn't room for significant improvement."

Ten of the 321 people cited in the audit never had a foster child placed with them, Udow said. They were in the system awaiting approval to become a foster parent, she said.

Relatives — uncles, aunts, grandparents and siblings — made up the rest of the 321 cases, according to department research. The state requires a criminal background check on relatives of a foster child before he or she is placed with them, but does not order checks after that.

Of those relatives with a criminal background, the state found 89 had convictions that did not inherently pose a risk to children after a review with the courts, Udow said in a written statement.

Auditors said periodic background checks would help department officials know whether a dangerous adult was living with foster children after they had been placed with a foster family.

The department has been working with the Michigan State Police for a year to set up a system to periodically check criminal histories of foster parents. It also is creating a computer network to quickly review criminal records, Udow said. She wants to see the requirement for periodic background checks put into state law so the practice will continue.

The audit also found that the department did not make sure its caseworkers were making required visits to foster children, their biological parents and foster parents. The visits allow caseworkers to check on the children and their living situation.

Udow said the department needs more money to boost staffing levels. Each Michigan caseworker handles an average 25 cases, but in some counties, it's as high as 40. A national child welfare organization recommends no caseworker handle more than 15 cases.

House Family and Children Services Committee Chairman John Stahl, R-North Branch, said the department should step up its training efforts.

"I'm frustrated here because when I hear inadequate staffing, I'm wondering if it's inadequate training," said Stahl, who will hold another hearing on the audit next week. "Lack of funding and lack of staff should never be a cause for inaccuracy."

Nonprofit switches gears to foster-care placement

BY SHERRI BEGIN
CRAIN'S DETROIT BUSINESS

After spending the past seven years planning an institutional village for abused and neglected children, Childhelp USA Michigan is heading in a new direction.

The nonprofit this fall plans to offer therapeutic foster-care placement for children in Macomb and Oakland counties' juvenile-justice systems from its Rochester Hills location.

"We can sense the state is reluctant to place children in residential treatment because costs are so high," said Elizabeth Brazilian, who founded the Greater Detroit Auxiliary of Childhelp, a volunteer group raising money for Childhelp's Michigan affiliate.

"We believe the way to get started in Michigan is with therapeutic foster care, but we're not giving up on a village."

Childhelp seeks 25 to 40 acres in Macomb or Oakland to build an assessment center where children will live for up to 90 days while their care is being considered. Within two years, the organization hopes to build a school and up to five group homes there, rather than the institutional care it offers in other states, Brazilian said.

The organization still is working out a master plan, but it's likely to cost between \$7 million and \$10 million, she said. Childhelp and the auxiliary plan to launch a capital campaign next spring.

The Michigan organization became an affiliate of Childhelp USA Inc. last October once a solid direction for programming emerged. Executive Director Jim Lewis said.

The \$600,000 raised so far by the Greater Detroit Auxiliary of Childhelp is held by the Scottsdale, Ariz.-based Childhelp USA, Lewis said. The Michigan affiliate, which will report consolidated financial results with its parent, is operating on a budget of about \$220,000 its first year with three employees.

The affiliate may be new, but its roots go back to 1998. That's when Brazilian began raising funds to bring Childhelp's programs to Michigan after becoming familiar with them while visiting Arizona.

Childhelp USA's four villages in Arizona, California, Virginia and Tennessee provide residential or institutional treatment for 80 to 100 children with severe emotional and physical problems because of abuse and neglect.

The village Childhelp hopes to build in Michigan would have five group homes, each with a live-in couple to provide oversight for eight children who will live there while receiving therapy and attending school on campus.

While it works out the details of building and funding a village, Childhelp plans to begin offering therapeutic foster-care placement and training, Lewis said. The nonprofit received its license in May to place children from the state's juvenile-justice system in foster care and to license families to accept them.

Although it will focus its initial placement services in Macomb and Oakland counties, the Michigan affiliate is licensed to place

children statewide, Lewis said.

Michigan is moving toward therapeutic foster care because it's in the best interests of the children, said Leonard Dixon, director of juvenile justice for the state and president of the National Juvenile Detention Association.

"The deeper kids go into the system, the less they are involved in their community, and the quicker you can get a kid back into his community or family setting, the better off the child is going to be."

The newer option for care can be cheaper, he said.

Foster-care payments in Michi-

gan for all types of out-of-home care range from \$14 a day to \$250 a day for institutional care. Therapeutic foster care likely will fall somewhere in the middle, Dixon said.

Dearborn Heights-based Vista Maria began offering therapeutic foster care with in-home mental-health services in partnership with the Southgate-based Guidance Center in July 2004.

It was developed for children with serious emotional disorders removed from their home because of abuse or neglect but who are too troubled for regular foster care,

Vista Maria President Cameron Hosner said.

Equipping therapeutic foster-care families for the needs of these children and providing the children themselves with in-home mental-health services is working, he said. To date, Vista Maria and the Guidance Center have returned eight of about 30 kids in the program to their home communities, Hosner said.

Vista Maria is reimbursed \$96 per child per day for providing the therapeutic foster-care component of the program that would be similar to Childhelp's new program,

Hosner said. Of that, Vista Maria gets \$36 to help pay its costs, while \$60 goes to the foster family.

Nationally, rates for therapeutic foster-care placement range from \$90 to \$140 a day, said Elizabeth Carey, executive director of the Lansing-based Michigan Federation for Children and Families.

"We would actually like to see therapeutic foster care in the state of Michigan," she said. "We believe it can be a very appropriate placement for a specialized group of kids."

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JENNIFER M. GRANHOLM
GOVERNOR

STATE OF MICHIGAN
DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES
LANSING

MARIANNE UDOW
DIRECTOR

News Advisory

Contact: Stepheni Schlinker (517) 373-7394

Macomb County DHS Celebrates New Approach to Child Welfare *"Family to Family" Initiative to be Showcased*

WHAT: The Macomb County Department of Human Services is hosting a media event to showcase a new approach to the child welfare system called Family to Family. Family to Family is a partnership between the Macomb County Department of Human Services and the community to reduce disruption in the lives of at-risk children living in Macomb County by strengthening resources for serving children within their homes, or foster homes within their own communities. This approach ensures that birth parents, foster parents and community representatives are involved in the decision-making process concerning the placement and service needs of at-risk children.

In 2001, Macomb County was one of the first sites in Michigan to implement the Family to Family initiative. Due to the success of this initiative in both Macomb and Wayne counties, it is now being implemented statewide by the Michigan Department of Human Services. Learn more about this innovative initiative from a panel of experts, including foster parents foster youth and community partners.

WHEN: Thursday, September 8, 2005
10:30 a.m.

WHERE: Mt. Calvary Family Community Center
8129 Packard
Warren, MI 48089

WHO: Speakers at this event include:
Angelo Nicholas, Macomb County Department of Human Services Director
Marianne Udow, Michigan Department of Human Services Director
Meriann Habarek, community liaison, Mt. Calvary Family Community Center
Mary Potts, kinship care coordinator, Department of Senior Services
Kathy Ross, DHS foster parent, Macomb County Foster Parent Advisory Committee
Jennifer Gorski, Macomb County S.P.I.R.I.T. Youth Board member
Dawn Walker, Family to Family coordinator, Macomb Co. Department of Human Services

PHOTO OP: A tour of the Mt. Calvary Family Community Center will be conducted immediately following the media event.

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Package of bills aims to protect seniors

9/7/2005, 7:42 a.m. ET

By KATHY BARKS HOFFMAN

The Associated Press

LANSING, Mich. (AP) — Fingerprints and background checks would be required for everyone working at nursing homes or caring for elderly residents in their homes under a package of bills unveiled Tuesday.

Gov. Jennifer Granholm, state Community Health director Janet Olszewski and three lawmakers — Democratic Rep. Paula Zelenko of Burton and Republican Reps. Gary Newell of Saranac and Barbara Vander Veen of Allendale — said during a news conference that the bills should keep criminals from preying on seniors.

"This package of bills puts ... Michigan ahead of the curve at the national level by requiring federal checks of all employees who have direct access to elderly and disabled patients," Olszewski said.

Besides nursing homes, facilities that must do background checks would be expanded to include certified home health agencies, hospices, providers of swing bed services, psychiatric hospitals and personal care agencies.

Anyone convicted of a felony would not be able to work in a care facility for seniors or the disabled until 15 years had passed since the sentence and parole had ended, and those convicted of crimes that included taking advantage of seniors could be banned from such work for life, Olszewski said. Workers could appeal if they think an employer has not treated them fairly.

The fingerprinting and background checks will be paid for with federal money, and the fingerprints will be entered in a federal data base.

"This is a much more aggressive way to handle the background checks," Olszewski said. Although she couldn't give a definite count of how many seniors had been harmed or taken advantage of by caregivers, Olszewski said the department agreed with advocates for seniors and the disabled that the issue needs to be addressed.

"We all have anecdotal evidence of this happening," she said. "It's a growing problem." A separate package of bills already has been introduced in the state Senate, but the governor said the newer package of bills involves workers at more types of facilities.

MIRS

Tuesday, September 6, 2005

Gov. Introduces Three Bills For Seniors

At a press conference today, Gov. Jennifer **GRANHOLM** introduced a package of bills designed to protect senior citizens and disabled persons from convicted criminals. The three-bill, bi-partisan package is not dissimilar to the slew of child protection bills signed into law last week.

Like the child safety laws, the package requires background checks and federal fingerprinting for all employees working in nursing homes, hospices, psychiatric facilities and those providing in-home care.

Currently, nursing home employees are the only senior care employees required to get background checks.

“This legislation will greatly expand current background check laws to protect our state's most valuable citizens,” Granholm said. “Once these protections are in place, Michigan will lead the nation in ensuring that our long-term health care facilities are safe for the hundreds of thousands of residents who call them home.”

The bills have a broader scope than ones recently introduced in the Senate because they expand the state's list of facilities required to perform background checks, Granholm said. The package will be introduced to the House this week.

Rep. Paula **ZELENKO** (D-Burton) is one of the bill's three sponsors and shared a firsthand experience she had with an in-home care employee taking advantage of her sick parents.

Both of Zelenko's parents were living with her and though Zelenko cared for them most of the time, they did hire an in-home caregiver. The woman was given a background check but the check came back clear. Eventually, the woman got into Zelenko's parents' checking account and took a substantial amount of money.

“Had this legislation been in place at the time, I think we might have a better chance of catching her,” Zelenko said.

Under the legislation, anyone convicted of a felony, especially a felony related to abuse or neglect, would not be allowed to administer care to senior citizens. Anyone with a felony could potentially be hired for a position in senior health care 15 years after completing the sentence for their conviction.

The last piece of legislation would allow workers disagreeing with hiring decisions by their employers to go through an appeals process. Previous background-check laws passed by the Legislature have been declared unconstitutional because they did not include an appeals system.

If the bills are passed, current senior care employees will be fingerprinted and given a background check. Those with felony convictions will be allowed to use the appeals process.

The startup costs are being paid for with a \$5 million federal grant, said Janet **OLSZEWSKI**, director of the Michigan Department of Community Health (MDCH).

Once the program's in place, it will continually be funded by Medicaid and Medicare because it qualifies as an allowable cost according to the two agencies.

Reps. Michael **MURPHY** (D-Lansing) and Gary **NEWELL** (R-Saranac) also sponsored the bills.

Newell couldn't resist having a little fun when Rep. Barb **VANDER VEEN** (R-Allendale), who is a registered nurse, said she'd be more than happy to get fingerprinted.

"In my former life I was a police officer and I'm looking forward to fingerprinting Barb," Newell said.

August 6, 2005

BILLS BROADEN NURSING WORKER BACKGROUND CHECKS

Bipartisan legislation expanding background checks on those working with residents needing nursing care will be introduced and has the support of Governor Jennifer Granholm.

Current law requires employees working with nursing home residents to undergo a background check.

But the bills, which have not yet been introduced, would mandate fingerprinting that would be cross-checked in a federal system. The legislation also would extend this tougher background check to anyone involved in the direct care of seniors, including hospice and home-based care – areas where no background check currently is required.

Anyone with a felony conviction involving abuse and neglect would be barred for life from administering nursing care under the bills. Other felonies and certain misdemeanors would mean a 15-year ban. Current law only allows for a 15-year ban regardless of circumstance.

The state has received a \$5 million federal grant to fund the program for its first 30 months and expects federal funding to keep the program running in the future, said Community Health Director Janet Olszewski.

Ms. Olszewski said the lack of a stricter background check is “a growing problem,” especially as more seniors receive care outside of nursing homes.

Rep. Paula Zelenko (D-Burton), present at a news conference with Ms. Granholm and others to announce the bills, said her parents were bilked by a nursing care worker. That worker actually had passed a background check even though the worker had committed a similar crime in the past, but Ms. Zelenko said if the worker had been fingerprinted and put through the federal system, that conviction might have been flagged.

Rep. Gary Newell (R-Saranac) and Rep. Barb Vander Veen (R-Allendale) attended the news conference.

Cherry addresses long-term care for seniors at town hall meeting

THE BURTON NEWS

Sunday, September 04, 2005

COMMUNITY STAFF WRITER

BURTON - Senator Deb Cherry, D-Burton, hosted a long term care town hall meeting at the Burton Senior Center on Aug. 25 to address one of Michigan's most pressing policy issues. Cherry, a member of the Governor's Long Term Care Task Force, discussed with seniors and aging experts ways to offer more flexibility in care, according to a press release from her office. Estimates show that by 2010 the number of Michigan residents who will need long-term care will likely outnumber the workers available to care for them. By 2020, 1 in 6 Michigan citizens will be over age 65.

"Seniors deserve to age with dignity in a safe, comfortable environment," said Cherry in the press release. "Sometimes that can be achieved by staying home with loved ones instead of moving into a nursing facility, but our current system doesn't always make that option feasible. Senate Democrats and the Governor are committed to enacting reforms that will provide more choices and ensure top-notch care for every senior."

The Long Term Care Task force identified a number of recommendations to improve the system: Fully fund MI-Choice Program: MI-Choice waivers are the mechanism by which Medicaid long term care recipients obtain funding for in-home and community-based care, but currently adequate funding has not been provided by the state to allow all of the seniors interested to participate.

On average, caring for someone requiring daily monitoring costs \$43 per day if that person lives in their own home. It costs Medicaid \$140 per day - more than three times as much - to care for that same person in a nursing home or other institutionalized facility.

Single point of access: Currently, consumers must piece together from many different agencies a package that will serve their own specific needs. The Task Force recommends creating a system in which consumers can access all of the necessary services from one centralized point.

Improve long term care worker conditions: Caregivers in the long term care industry are usually severely underpaid and often work without access to healthcare themselves.

"Long term care workers are entrusted with caring for our parents and our grandparents, and they could eventually care for each of us," Cherry said. "Yet these workers often work for poverty-level wages under extremely difficult conditions. Our loved ones and those who care for them deserve better."

A copy of the final report by the Governor's Long Term Care Task Force is available at: www.iwcs.msu.edu/LTC/default.htm

Judge scolds young killer

Nathaniel Abraham told to 'come clean' regarding incident at training school, work on behavior, attitude.

*By Maureen Feighan / The Detroit News
Wednesday, September 7, 2005*

PONTIAC -- Michigan's youngest convicted killer continues to struggle with anger and authority but will have to get his act together if he wants a job and to go to a halfway house before his scheduled release in 1 1/2 years, an Oakland County probate judge ruled Tuesday.

Judge Eugene Moore gave Nathaniel Abraham, now 19, three weeks to "come clean" about his role in an Aug. 4 incident at the W.J. Maxey Boys Training School in which a group of boys allegedly shouted obscenities in a "gang-like atmosphere" at a teacher during a softball game.

Moore further ordered Abraham to get back on track with his treatment program and work on his behavior, attitude and respect for authority to get a job at a warehouse at Maxey and be allowed to enter a halfway house. Another review hearing is scheduled for Sept. 27.

Moore said if Abraham continues to struggle with authority and breaks the law while at Maxey, criminal charges could be filed against him by the Washtenaw County prosecutor.

"The prosecutor has a way to keep you past your 21st birthday," Moore said. "... I'm not threatening you. I'm just telling you that that's another alternative the prosecutor has. The ball is in your court."

Abraham was charged in 1997 at age 11 for fatally shooting Ronnie Greene Jr., 18, of Pontiac. Abraham was convicted and sentenced as a juvenile in 2000.

At the hearing, Nicole Greene, Greene's sister, urged the court not to let Abraham go to a halfway house until he makes progress. "He's got to take the punches that come his way," she said. "And if he doesn't, he'll end up right back where he was."

When questioned by Moore about what he needs to do to get to the next level of his treatment program -- the level needed to get a job at Maxey -- Abraham stood up and repeated back to Moore the four things he needs to work on.

Harry Adams, a Maxey social worker, said Abraham has the ability to show leadership. But Adams said the teen continues to have problems with his attitude, managing his anger and respecting authority.

Gloria Abraham, Nathaniel's mother, attended the hearing with his sister and grandfather. She declined to comment on what her son must do to leave Maxey. "He knows what he has to do," she said.

You can reach Maureen Feighan at (248) 647-7416 or mfeighan@detnews.com.

Abraham told to straighten up if he wants out of Maxey

9/7/2005, 5:34 a.m. ET

The Associated Press

PONTIAC, Mich. (AP) — A judge says Nathaniel Abraham, convicted of murdering a man with a rifle shot at age 11, will have to overcome temper and behavior problems if he wants to enter a halfway house before his scheduled release in January 2007.

Oakland County Probate Judge Eugene Arthur Moore on Tuesday gave Abraham, now 19, three weeks to "come clean" about an Aug. 4 disturbance at the W.J. Maxey Boys Training School. Authorities say a group of boys shouted obscenities in a "gang-like atmosphere" at a teacher during a softball game.

Moore also ordered Abraham to adhere to a treatment program and improve his behavior, attitude and respect for authority to be permitted to work at a warehouse at Maxey and be allowed to enter a halfway house.

The judge scheduled a review hearing for Sept. 27.

Abraham has been in juvenile detention since the 1997 shooting death of Ronnie Lee Greene, 18, in Pontiac. Convicted of second-degree murder as an adult but sentenced as a juvenile, Abraham will be freed from all state supervision when he turns 21 on Jan. 19, 2007

Cops say teen shot, killed man in Detroit

Detroit free Press - September 7, 2005

A dispute between a man and a teenager ended with the teen shooting the man to death Tuesday evening on Detroit's west side, police said.

Detroit Police Officer Jeremy Aguayo said both were in the 10300 block of 7 Mile at 8:13 p.m. when the 17-year-old boy fired several shots at the 31-year-old man.

The teen later was found hiding in a backyard on the west side.

By Cecil Angel

Parents locked up for truancy?

Wednesday, September 07, 2005

By Dave Murray
The Grand Rapids Press

GRAND RAPIDS -- Kent County Prosecutor Bill Forsyth says he doesn't want to see parents sent to jail.

But that might be what it takes to make sure students are in school.

Leaders from the county's law enforcement and social service agencies appeared Tuesday with Grand Rapids Public Schools administrators to show what they called a partnership to fight truancy.

The program calls for the schools to alert Grand Rapids police and county Department of Human Services after elementary students pile up more than 20 unexcused absences.

Last year, 633 city elementary students missed more than 20 days, and some missed more than 70 days.

"It's not my goal to lock parents in jail and take their children away," said Forsyth, appearing with Police Chief Harry Dolan, Human Services Director Andrew Zylstra and Superintendent Bert Bleke.

"We're not trying to make criminals out of parents. But we want to help these kids today, so the chief and I don't have to deal with them again in the future."

Forsyth said he wanted to emphasize elementary grades because younger students tend not to miss school on their own.

Not sending children younger than 16 to school is a misdemeanor, punishable by as many as 93 days in jail.

Teresa Neal, the school district's assistant to the superintendent for community and student affairs, said the idea is to find out why parents aren't sending the kids to class. If staff members visiting homes determine there are health or social problems in the family, social service agencies will be asked to help.

If problems continue, the police will be asked to step in.

"Sometimes, there are a whole host of problems, including substance abuse. And at some times, it is flat-out neglect," Dolan said. "We're taking a no-excuses approach. We all have to work together to make sure these children are in school so they have some kind of future."

High school students -- who legally can stop attending at age 16 -- fall under a different policy modified by the school board last month. Students cannot miss more than 10 classes without making up the time after school or in Saturday sessions, although absences would not force a teacher to give a student failing grades.

Countywide, such cases are reported to Ross Cate, a truancy officer based in the Kent Intermediate School District who attended Tuesday's gathering.

Districts reported 745 cases -- 119 from Grand Rapids -- to Cate during the 2004-05 school year.

Child support amnesty offered

Michigan gives parents who collectively owe more than \$8.8 billion a chance to catch up, avoid penalties.

By Kim Kozlowski / The Detroit News
Wednesday, September 7, 2005

The 610,000 Michigan parents who collectively owe more than \$8.8 billion in delinquent child support may avoid sanctions if they catch up on their debt by year-end.

Beginning Oct. 1, the state will offer an amnesty program that gives parents three months to catch up on overdue payments. Those who take part will avoid the civil and criminal enforcement tactics available to the state, such as a restricted driver's license, a lien on property, denial of a passport or even an arrest warrant. If such sanctions already have been imposed, they would be lifted for parents who can pay half the amount owed by Oct. 1 and the remainder of their past-due balance by Dec. 31.

Felony warrants would not be waived, however.

Similar to initiatives attempted in other states, the three-month amnesty window was mandated by a state law passed in 2004 but has faced criticism from parents and activists, who say those with an arrearage either don't have the money at all or can't come up with it on short notice. Most also lament other problems in the state child support system.

Among those who are skeptical of the program is Jason Bottomley, who lost his customer service representative job last year. He says that's why he has fallen \$3,000 behind on the \$544 monthly child support he pays to the mother of his 7-year-old daughter. He's tried getting his support obligation lowered to reflect his financial situation. Right now there is no way he could come up with the \$3,000 he owes, so he can't take advantage of the amnesty offer.

"If I had the money I would," said Bottomley, 32, of Macomb Township.

"Since I haven't worked and I'm living off savings and will soon get unemployment, I've barely been able to make the bills as it is."

State officials say they realize there are many people who can't afford to take advantage of this program but they want to make it available to those who can.

"The benefit is if somebody has fallen behind in their support and is not clear on how to resolve it, this is a great opportunity for them to do the right thing," said Marilyn Stephen, director of the Office of Child Support in the state's Department of Human Services.

The state has an interest in the amnesty program because the federal government gives incentives to states for performing well in child support collection and enforcement.

Last year, Michigan received \$27 million but it could receive even more if more people paid something on their arrearages. Of the \$27 million, \$19 million went to county Friend of the Court offices and prosecutors, and the rest stayed at the state level to fund child support activities.

Stephen insists collecting on back child support is for the interest of the children, not necessarily the state.

"We're trying to find ways to get money into the hands of families that need it," Stephen said. "A lot of families that have child support orders are not wealthy families. This is very, very important money for them to live on."

The National Family Justice Association supports the program, but noted that some fathers are calling it the "rich man's relief," since a 2003 federal study showed that 75 percent of parents owing back child support earned less than \$10,000. Meanwhile, Michigan parents with an arrearage owe an average of \$14,000, state officials said.

"Therefore, it unfortunately falls into a category of window dressing for our problems," said Murray Davis, board president.

Additionally, Davis noted, the \$8.8 billion debt includes late-payment surcharges levied by the state.

"The majority of people who fall behind in their child support payments do not willfully refuse to pay," Davis said. "Most cannot pay (but) society, state laws and family courts unfairly hold noncustodial parents to an unattainable standard to never become ill, unemployed, disabled or laid off in a poor economy."

Parents get behind on their child support payments for a number of reasons, some of which are not their fault. For instance, it can take several months before a child support order gets executed. But the financial obligation begins as soon as an order is signed by the court, even if a mechanism isn't in place to collect it.

For those who fall behind, sanctions can mount. The Friend of the Court will use a variety of enforcement measures when back child support accrues. For instance, if a parent is \$2,500 behind, a lien or levy can be placed on a person's assets. If \$5,000 is owed, the Friend of the Court can intercept a federal tax refund, deny a passport and issue a bench warrant for arrest.

This is one of the reasons why state Rep. Alexander Lipsey, R-Kalamazoo, sponsored the amnesty legislation. "This is one of those situations parents will know they can wipe the slate clean within 90 days and I think a lot of them will," Lipsey said.

Nicole Spencer, 38, isn't so sure.

She has never seen a dime of child support from either of the fathers of her two daughters. And she doesn't expect to see any now.

"They didn't pay it by now, they're not going to," said Spencer, a Detroit resident. She applauds the effort of the state trying to collect back child support from parents. But Joe Panessidi said it's a little more complicated than that. Coming up with the full amount in three months is ridiculous, he said, especially since divorced families often are financially strapped.

"A 90-days window means that the possibility for coming up with back child support is nil, especially in a lump sum," said Panessidi, a Brighton resident. "Where would fathers get a lump sum? Borrow it with unsecured credit cards? The amnesty program is so limited it's not funny."

Other states have netted results with similar initiatives.

Earlier this month, Maryland, two counties in Virginia and the city of Washington, D.C., offered a two-week amnesty for parents who owed child support. But those programs did not require that the entire past-due amount be paid in full.

Maryland collected nearly \$571,000 from 2,700 parents, in part by extending the hours at local offices and keeping some open on weekends.

"This is a fraction of what is owed," said Norris West, spokesman for the Maryland Department of Human Services. "But we found this was very significant. We were able to reconnect 3,000 delinquent parents with their children financially, and hopefully emotionally, too."

The measure also helped get some parents back on track for paying child support with affordable payments.

"Once we get them back on track, we want to keep them on track," West said.

DADS of Michigan, an advocacy group for fathers, supports Michigan's amnesty program. But leaders of the group caution there are many fathers who can't afford to pay their back child support. "It's not a bad message," said Jim Semerad, chairman of the DADS of Michigan political action committee. "It gets the message out there we're trying to do some stuff to keep people from getting arrested."

But he added there are many other issues that need to be addressed with the Friend of the Court, such as undistributed child support, timeliness of processing orders and scheduling court hearings and adjusting child support obligations when families have a change in circumstances, like a job loss.

"It still does not correct the many errors in the system," Semerad said.

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Obesity weighs heavily on Medicaid budget

Wednesday, September 7, 2005

By Sharon Emery

Lansing Bureau

LANSING -- Determined to stanch the erupting cost of Medicaid, GOP lawmakers want to inject what they say is a novel but necessary concept into the taxpayer-funded health care program: requiring recipients to take more responsibility for their own health.

They point to similar efforts by private insurers, and say it's high time the state considered using those measures to help curtail costs in the \$7.1 billion federal-state program for low-income people.

But the ability of government to change behavior is hotly debated, and nowhere is that clearer than in efforts to reduce the epidemic of obesity, which state statistics show is more common among poorer Michigan residents.

While the state doesn't regularly track obesity-related costs, a 2003 report by the Michigan Fitness Foundation estimated the direct costs of physical inactivity in Michigan for medical care, workers compensation and lost productivity at more than \$8.9 billion, \$69 million of which was Medicaid expenses.

"Obesity is a huge public health problem for this state and there are very significant costs attached to that," said Stephen Fitton, director of the Bureau of Medicaid Policy and Actuarial Services in the Michigan Department of Community Health.

Excess weight increases the risk for more than 30 preventable chronic conditions, including heart disease and diabetes. It may soon surpass smoking as the No. 1 cause of preventable death, and the state wants Michigan residents of all income levels to shape up. The state has a "Michigan Steps Up" Web site (www.michiganstepsup.com) where residents can get weight-loss tips and develop a personal fitness plan.

But to the extent that Michigan can restrain obesity-related costs to taxpayers, Republican lawmakers want overweight Medicaid patients to sign personal responsibility agreements saying they'll work on their weight or start paying premiums for health care.

"You have to be innovative when you're dealing with something like obesity," said Sen. Tom George, R-Kalamazoo, who is also an anesthesiologist.

"We've left it open on how we might do this, but we might focus not on losing weight but on a little gentler approach: If you can maintain your current weight, then we will reward you," he said, by reducing health care premiums or expanding benefits, for example.

But some state health officials are not so sure. Democratic lawmakers have also questioned the plan.

"Obesity is a very complex condition for which no single strategy has been found to be effective on a sustained basis, including personal responsibility contracts," said Carol Callaghan, director of the chronic disease division of the Department of Community Health, in an e-mail.

"Otherwise two-thirds of the Michigan population would not be obese currently, or overweight and at risk of becoming obese."

Advocates for the poor say obesity is not just about diet, but economic structure.

They say low-income people are at risk for obesity because it's cheaper to eat -- and easier to obtain -- fries than fruit, for example, if you live in the inner city. And they cite food insecurity, basically not knowing where your next meal is coming from, with inducing people to eat more than they should when they do have food.

"We should be investing in these (food) programs and thinking about how we can improve access to good food -- making an investment in better health, instead of applying punitive measures where if you don't do what we say, you're out," said Jane Marshall, executive director of the Food Bank Council of Michigan.

A study out last month found that 25.3 percent of Michigan residents, sixth highest in the country, are obese as determined by a weight-height index, according to the Trust for American Health. The health advocacy group wants government to take a more active role in helping people beat the battle of the bulge.

That call appeals to Michigan lawmakers who want Medicaid recipients who are not elderly or disabled to pay a premium of about \$5 a month. They could lower or eliminate that premium by signing a personal responsibility agreement that would specify "certain actions that a Medicaid recipient would agree to undertake, such as not smoking, having a personal health assessment each year, having one's child immunized and showing up for health care appointments," according to an initial draft of the bill.

While negotiations on the 2006 budget are ongoing, the plan may not make it into the final bill.

George said current anti-obesity efforts aren't enough and that he's mystified by the opposition.

"You have to do more than put up a Web site and talk about it and lead a five-mile walk," George said, a reference to the governor's annual Labor Day run across the Mackinac Bridge.

By injecting economic incentives into the personal agreements, the plan reminds people that "you have some responsibility if you're going to get this benefit," George said.

"If we're not one of first (states to do this), then we'll be one of last," he said.

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Michigan residents earning less than \$20,000 a year are more likely to be obese than people earning more, although obesity rates have increased among all groups:

1997 2003

Less than \$20,000 23 percent 32 percent

\$20,000-34,999 21 27

\$35,000-49,999 17 27

More than \$50,000 17 22

Stranger danger

By Tanya Berkebile, Cadillac News

September 7, 2005

With school back in session at most area schools, it is the time of year where children can be more vulnerable and come into contact with strangers.

Craig Baumgartner, Reed City Schools liaison officer and deputy of the Osceola County Sheriff's Department, said it isn't uncommon for strangers to approach children in the area.

"We've had instances where parents had reported incidents of their children being approached by strangers," he said. "But they were safety-minded and did not approach the vehicle."

In Reed City Schools, teaching students about safety issues is part of the curriculum. Baumgartner teaches students in K-12 about different issues, age appropriate, pertaining to subjects being studied in their classes.

"In K through second grade, I talk to the students about knowing who they can trust," he said. "I tell them there are people who they can go to in a situation including the police, fire department or paramedics. I also tell them what they wear so they know who they should look for."

Danette Crozier, elementary school social worker at Kenwood Elementary, said although she isn't aware of problems with strangers contacting students in the Cadillac area, people should never assume this community is safer than another.

"It can happen anywhere. There isn't a certain place where strangers approach children," she said. "Parents and children should always be concerned and always be vigilant."

It's vital for parents to provide supervision at all times for children, including teens.

Not only supervision in the sense of being with a child, but also being aware of where the child is and when he or she is expected to be home.

"Parents can't normally be around a child all day, but they should be aware of where their child is," said Crozier. "They should also be aware of what their children are doing, especially on the Internet where predators can hook children in by developing trust and relationships."

With this day and age, many children use the Internet for research and recreation. There are many chatrooms, with some targeting children.

"As far as parents, the No. 1 thing is to know what they are doing online," said Gary Laurie, trooper with the Cadillac Michigan State Police. "A predator can pose to be a 10-year-old girl. If

it seems wrong or feels wrong, it probably is wrong. They should get out of the chatroom right away."

Parents also need to be aware of who their children are talking to on the telephone. There are cases of predators using the phone, even locally, to call minors for sexual gratification.

"So many parents let their young children answer the phone. These incidents can take place when the parents are right at home," Laurie said. "It is the age of technology and unless you don't have a telephone or the Internet, it is an open invitation for the world to come in. Parents really need to communicate and be aware."

With the school year, many students walk or ride their bike to school. It is important for children to be on the lookout for suspicious activities or people. If they are approached by stranger, Crozier said there are a few things that can be done.

"First off, children should never approach a strange person or their vehicle," she said. "They should continue to walk or run away from the person or yell to draw attention."

If a child is near a school, police department or other public building, they should immediately seek help there. Crossing guards also are safe people to talk to.

"It is also a good idea for parents to preplan in the event of a situation with a stranger," said Crozier. "If your child has a long distance walk to school, maybe show them some safety houses - of people they know and trust - where they can go if a stranger is near. They must plan for the worst and hope for the best."

When walking home from school, students should walk in a group or with another sibling because predators rarely prey on a group - it is mainly individuals.

Crozier said in Second Step, an assertive training course for students through fifth grade, they teach students to show confidence and walk with a purpose.

"Strangers are more likely to approach a child who is walking with their head down and at a slower pace," she said. "Appearing confident will show you are not an easy target."

Baumgartner said it also is important for children to tell their parents where they are going, when they expect to return and what route they plan to take.

"All this information is important in the case of something happening," said Baumgartner.

Strangers can also approach a child in a public place. If a family goes to a beach, amusement park or grocery store, parents should go over safety points with children.

"Discuss what should be done if you are separated, maybe have a meeting place designated in the event the family gets alienated," said Crozier. "It's also a good idea to show your child what workers look like. For example, at Wal-Mart, the child should look for someone with a blue vest

and a nametag. They shouldn't go to just any adult."

Staff writer Rick Charmoli contributed to this report.

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ACROSS THE NATION

ATLANTA

Gun storage survey shows kids in danger

About 1.7 million U.S. children — 2.5% — live in homes that have loaded and unlocked guns, according to what is described as the first comprehensive survey of gun storage in homes across the country.

The study, published Tuesday in the journal *Pediatrics*, was based on a 2002 telephone survey of about 241,000 adults.

Estimates from the early 1990s put the percentage at 10%. The new results suggest a decline, but that doesn't mean there's cause for celebration, said Catherine Okoro, a study author.

"That's still too many children to be put at risk," said Okoro, an epidemiologist with the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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Learning programs give kids early start

SHIAWASSEE COUNTY

THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION
Sunday, September 04, 2005

By Linda Angelo langelo@flintjournal.com • 810.766.6340

SHIAWASSEE COUNTY - Education begins at birth - that's the message parents and caregivers are seeing on billboards, television ads and in the new "Get Ready, Get Set, Grow!" newsletter.

The massive public education campaign targets parents and caregivers who aren't sure how to encourage learning or feel they lack the time to prepare their child for school.

Research shows that brain development occurs most rapidly and easily in the first three years, and by age 5, 85 percent of a child's intellectual and social development has occurred, said Cathy Stevenson, community resource liaison at Memorial Healthcare in Owosso.

"Every moment is a teachable moment," she said. "You can't start too early reading and playing and singing with babies."

Memorial Healthcare has teamed up with the Shiawassee Regional Education Service District and Shiawassee United Way to publish "Get Ready, Get Set, Grow!" - one of several early childhood initiatives under way in the county.

The free newsletter gives information about different stages of development, what parents can do to stimulate babies and a physician referral phone line, as well as sections on literacy, safety, food and nutrition and parent resources. A calendar lists play groups, parent support groups and library story hours.

The newsletter - published in January and July - is funded for three years through a \$6,400 grant from the Cook Family Foundation.

The countywide effort to educate young children coincides with Gov.

Jennifer Granholm's Project Great Start, a program designed to ensure that every child is prepared to succeed in school and beyond.

A key component of Granholm's program is the Read, Educate and Develop Youth kits, which provide a children's book, learning activities, video and music cassette for infants, toddlers and preschoolers.

Born Learning, a campaign through United Way, attempts to communicate through public service announcements, educational materials, Web site tips and billboards, including one on I-69 near the Morrish Road exit that states: "Look, a big purple rectangle. Everyday moments can be learning moments with your kids."

QUICK TAKE

Early childhood initiatives "Get Ready, Get Set, Grow!": Newsletter for parents with kids up to age 5. Free subscription: (866) 725-7792, (989) 725-2581.

Born Learning: United Way campaign that encourages early learning during everyday activities.

Details: bornlearning.org or Shiawassee United Way, (989) 723-4987. Shiawassee ABC: Program for children 5 and younger that offers home visits, hearing and vision screening, play groups, development evaluations and child development

information. Details: (866) 725-7792 or (989) 725-2581.

Even Start: Literacy program for families with children 7 and younger and parent or parents with low literacy or no diploma. Details: (866) 725-7792 or (989) 725-2581.

Early On: Two programs for children 0-3. One for kids with minor developmental delays or who are at risk for delay; one for infants and toddlers with developmental delays warranting special education. Details: (866) 725-7792, (989) 725-2581.

Read, Educate and Develop Youth (READ) kits: Educational materials for infants, toddlers and preschoolers provided by Michigan Department of Education. Details: www.michigan.gov/greatstart, (800) 214-8961.

Letters

Wednesday, September 07, 2005

The Grand Rapids Press

Nation's poverty revealed

The tragedy in New Orleans has caused untold suffering by Americans of all kinds. Natural disasters make no distinction between race, religion and economic class. But as the story has unfolded, it has become painfully obvious that the most helpless are the poor, sick and elderly. The vast majority of people who were trapped in New Orleans were not there because they decided to "ride it out (as some pundits would have people believe)." They were there because they had no way out. They had no car, no money, no family, or were just too sick to escape. The day the storm struck, the government released new statistics showing how more Americans than ever are living in poverty. While corporate executives and Hollywood stars are earning obscene salaries and receiving lavish tax cuts, more and more Americans are poor, hungry and without access to health care. For the most part, they carry on in the depths of the major cities -- out of sight and out of mind.

What Hurricane Katrina has done is reveal the depths of American poverty in a way that can't be ignored. It makes me deeply ashamed. Every city hides this potential tragedy within it, and the American government has turned its back. Six years ago, Washington was awash with surpluses that could have been used to improve the lives of Americans in need. Now that that wealth has been squandered, the poor of New Orleans, and Biloxi and Mobile are rising up to show us how badly we have failed our countrymen.

FREDERICK CLOWNEY

Oakland Briefs*Detroit News**September 7, 2005***Holly****Agency to give out free food Thursday**

Free food will be distributed to income-eligible applicants from 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Thursday at the Oakland Livingston Human Services Office, 201 Elm in Holly. Those not already registered with the agency must provide proof of current address, proof of family size, household income information and photo identification.

For information, including other distribution sites and times, call (248) 209-2686.

GOP should cut a deal with Dems to raise minimum wage

Sunday, September 04, 2005

Saginaw News

A year ago, a Michigan worker earning minimum wage had to toil a little more than four hours to buy 12 gallons of gasoline on the way to work.

Last week, gasoline prices soared to \$3.50 a gallon in some places. Work hours required to fill up the tank? Eight. Or, simply, a day's work.

If you're hanging onto an economic ledge, as are most of the half-million Michigan workers earning minimum wage, fuel prices could send you tumbling.

Democratic lawmakers for years have sought to boost Michigan's \$5.15 minimum wage, which is tied to the federal minimum. Both were last increased eight years ago.

A bill that would increase the wage to \$7.15 an hour by Jan. 1, 2007, with annual inflation adjustments thereafter was introduced in the state Senate on March 17. On this Labor Day weekend, it's gathering mold in the Republican-run Senate Commerce and Labor Committee.

By next Labor Day, it won't matter whether Republicans move the bill. At that point, a minimum wage increase will appear on the fall 2006 ballot. This winter, Democrats and their allies in organized labor will begin collecting the signatures required to put it there.

Conventional wisdom holds that Republicans and their backers in the business community could defeat it with a vigorous opposition campaign. Perhaps not.

Supporters include those making the minimum wage now, those whose kids are making it or those who generally think it makes sense from an economic and social standpoint.

Even while standing still, the value of the minimum wage has fallen. Witness last week's report from the U.S. Census Bureau that showed 12.3 percent of Michigan's population lives in poverty, up from 11.5 percent the year before.

When the minimum wage was last increased in 1997, the gross pay from a 40-hour work week at minimum wage was 84 percent of the poverty threshold. In 2004, it was 71 percent.

Compare that to a member of the Michigan Legislature, who in 1997 made four times the poverty level. In 2004, it was five times.

If Democrats run a petition drive for a citizen-initiated law raising the minimum wage, the measure goes first to the state Legislature. Republicans who run the House and Senate will have three choices: Pass it, reject it or ignore it.

This is the GOP dilemma: Approval would anger the Michigan Chamber of Commerce and other business allies. Rejection could turn into terrible politics if voters believe that Republicans oppose what is in citizens' best economic interests.

If Republicans are smart, once they return to work in earnest after a long, restful summer vacation, they'll cut some kind of deal with Democrats -- perhaps an initial \$1 increase on Jan. 1 and an inflation adjuster. Michigan would become not the first, but the 16th state since 1997 to raise the minimum wage beyond the federal standard. It would demonstrate at least some GOP understanding of what the little guy is going through. And from an all-important political standpoint, it would deny Gov. Jennifer M. Granholm and Democratic legislators a potentially potent 2006 campaign issue.

Will they do it? Probably not. But for those of you out there making minimum wage and shelling out \$42 to fill the tank of your '93 Cavalier, one way or the other you'll likely get a raise -- such as it is.

Michigan Report

September 6, 2005

SIKKEMA: CONTINUATION BUDGET NOT AN OPTION

Senate Majority Leader Ken Sikkema (R-Wyoming) ruled out Tuesday using emergency bills to keep the government running if the Republican-controlled Legislature and Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm cannot agree on a budget before the new fiscal year begins October 1.

Mr. Sikkema said the state simply must enact a budget before the new fiscal year starts and even entertaining the continuation budget scenario only delays making those decisions.

Meanwhile, with the end of the fiscal year now 24 days away, officials continued to report “progress” in discussions between the administration and legislative leaders in reaching an agreement on the budget.

Meetings were held again Monday to work on final target agreements, and meetings are expected throughout the week.

An administration official said progress was being made in the discussions, but the progress is “baby steps.”

While there has been progress in the talks, Mr. Sikkema said he considers the discussions behind. A year ago agreement was reached on September 2 and in 2003 the budget was completed during the summer.

Mr. Sikkema refused to detail what the holdups are in the budget agreement, although another source indicated many of the major issues which have been contentious all year remain so.

Mr. Sikkema also said he was not “interested in playing the confrontation game or the brinksmanship game.” It is time for the state to reach agreement, he said.

Asked if failure to reach a budget agreement would look worse for the Legislature or Governor Jennifer Granholm, Mr. Sikkema said the public would say, “a pox on both your houses. We both would look bad.”

When asked Tuesday at what point negotiations become tense over making the deadline, House Speaker Craig DeRoche (R- Novi) told reporters, “They’re tense now.”

And asked if the budget would go right up until the late evening hours of September 30, Mr. DeRoche said: "If it does, it's not what's intended. I don't think anybody went into this with the idea of going to the deadline."